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ESL TEACHERS AND PRONUNCIATION PEDAGOGY: EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS' COGNITIONS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, increasing more research has examined the cognitions (knowledge and beliefs) of second language (L2) teachers. Such research has provided insight into what constitutes teachers' beliefs and knowledge about teaching, how these cognitions have developed and how they are reflected in classroom practice (see Borg, 2006). Although numerous studies have been conducted into the curricular areas of grammar and, to a lesser extent, reading and writing, even fewer have examined teachers' cognitions into pronunciation instruction. The purpose of the present study, therefore, is to explore some of the dynamic relationships that exist between L2 teachers' cognitions and their actual pedagogical practices, but with a specific focus on how these cognitions have developed over time. In particular, the cognitions and practices - as they relate to the teaching of pronunciation - of five experienced ESL teachers are investigated. Overall, findings reveal that the amount of training teachers have received in pronunciation pedagogy strongly affects not only their knowledge of pronunciation and pronunciation pedagogy, but also their confidence in that area. Results further show that L2 learning experiences, teaching experience and collaborative work with colleagues can also influence teachers' practices and cognitions.

INTRODUCTION

One of the important areas of study in second language (L2) teacher education research is the study of *teacher cognition*. Exploring *teacher cognition* - defined as the relationship between the beliefs, knowledge and perceptions that teachers' have with respect to their teaching practices (Borg, 2003) - can provide insight into how teachers' beliefs and knowledge interact in the language classroom and influence their pedagogical behaviors, actions and activities. An essential element of this research, however, is the inclusion of observations of teachers' actual classroom practices and not merely teachers' self-reports of their practices (Borg, 2006). Although second language teacher cognition (L2TC) research has examined teachers' cognitions in relation to teaching many L2 skills areas, pronunciation is relatively underexplored.

L2TC research has focused mainly on the areas of grammar (e.g., Popko, 2005) and, to a lesser extent, reading (e.g., Johnson, 1992) and writing (e.g., Farrell, 2006). Many of these studies have explored connections between teachers' beliefs and actual classroom practices, finding that relationship between beliefs and practices may either correlate strongly (as in the case of Johnson, 1992) or demonstrate several differences between the two (as in the case of Farrell, 2006). Another area of primary interest in L2TC research is the investigation of different factors

that contribute to the development of teachers' cognitions. These factors have included teachers' previous experiences learning an L2 (Ellis, 2006; Farrell, 1999), teacher training (Borg, 1998; Popko, 2005), teaching experience (Gatbonton, 2008; Mattheoudakis, 2007) and knowledge sharing with colleagues (Sengupta & Xiao, 2002).

In comparison with L2 skills areas such as grammar and literacy mentioned above, pronunciation has received little attention. One of the few studies that has focused on teachers' knowledge and beliefs as related to teaching pronunciation is Baker (forthcoming); yet, this research does not include observations of the teachers' classroom practices. (See Baker & Murphy, forthcoming, for an expanded discussion of L2TC research and pronunciation pedagogy). This lack of research into pronunciation and L2TC is surprising considering the essential role that pronunciation plays in successful communication. Intelligible pronunciation is important not only in interactions involving native speakers, but between non-native speakers as well (Levis, 2005; Pickering, 2006).

In a similar vein, relatively few teacher education programs provide courses on how to teach L2 pronunciation. In fact, research has indicated that many L2 teachers have received little or no specific training in this area (Breitkreutz, Derwing & Rossiter, 2001; Derwing, 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Murphy, 1997) and that teachers can be reluctant to teach pronunciation due to lack of training in pronunciation pedagogy and/or access to appropriate materials (Macdonald, 2002). Despite this apparent neglect, however, there is a demand among ESL learners for pronunciation instruction (Couper, 2003; Derwing & Rossiter, 2002). In fact, many learners hope to acquire native-like accents (Derwing & Munro, 2003; Kang, 2010; Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, & Wu, 2006; Timmis, 2002) despite continued efforts to legitimize English as a *Lingua Franca* varieties (Jenkins, 2007) and other native models.

With the need for more L2TC research into pronunciation pedagogy (hereafter PrP) established, the current study focuses on one specific area of L2TC that warrants greater investigation, namely, the factors that contribute to the development of teachers' cognitions and pedagogical practices as related to pronunciation instruction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study provides a detailed description of some of the dynamic relationships that exist between experienced ESL teachers' cognitions and their observed practices when teaching pronunciation, focusing specifically on the development of these cognitions and practices. The research questions are:

- 1) What cognitions do experienced teachers have in relation to teaching pronunciation?
- 2) How have these cognitions developed?
- 3) How are these cognitions reflected in their actual practices?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

Interviews and classroom observations were completed with five teachers in an Intensive English program (IEP) in a university in southeastern USA. For each participant, Table 1 provides: 1) years of teaching experience; 2) the level of oral communication (OC) course taught; 3) whether they have a degree related to TESOL; and 4) the location where that degree was obtained (Designated as Universities A, B and C, respectively). All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1: *Participant Backgrounds*

| | Tanya | Laura | Abby | Ginger | Vala |
|----------------------------------|----------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Years Teaching Experience | 7 | 6 | 6 | 14 | 7 |
| Current OC Course | High Beginning | Low Intermediate | Intermediate | Intermediate | High Intermediate |
| MA degree – TESOL-related | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Degree Location | A | A | A | B | C |

Teacher Data

The teachers participated in three types of data collection procedures over one semester: three semi-structured (SS) interviews, five classroom observations, and two stimulated recall (SR) interviews. Figure 1 provides a general timeline for these procedures. The three SS interviews took place at different points, corresponding to the beginning, middle and end of the semester. The purpose of these interviews was to explore teachers' knowledge and beliefs about pronunciation and PrP. In the SR interviews, participants viewed pronunciation-related segments from the video-recorded observations and then recounted their cognitions at the time the event took place. The interviews and observed classes were transcribed.

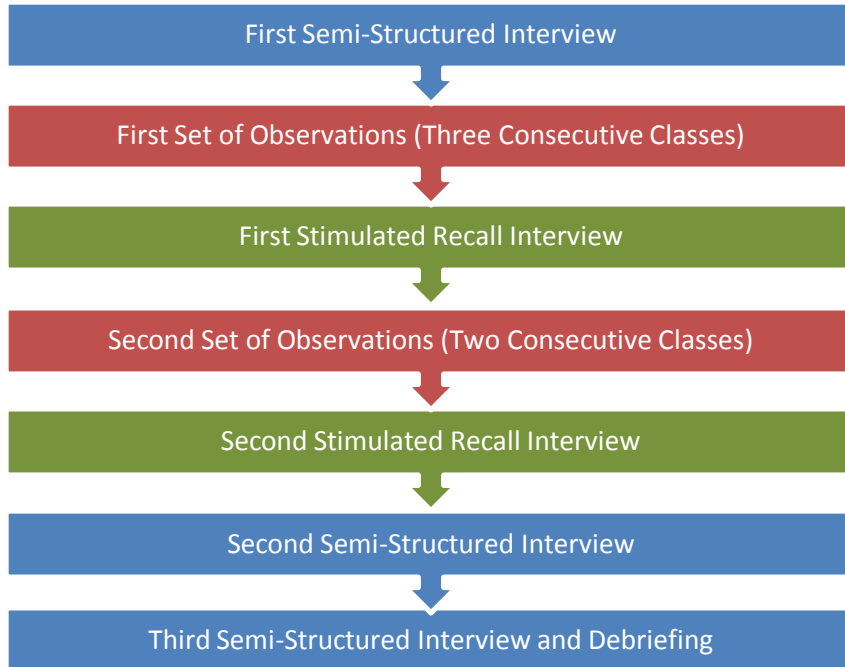


Figure 1: Research Timeline

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION¹

This section first examines how the teachers' knowledge of PrP has developed over time, and later explores this development in relation to the teachers' confidence in teaching pronunciation.

Development of Knowledge about Pronunciation Pedagogy

An integral component of trying to determine the source of teachers' knowledge of PrP required asking the teachers to describe their most prominent memories as they pertain to both learning an L2 and earning a TESOL degree. A part of this analysis included a brief look at their experience in teaching their respective OC courses. Table 2 provides a summary of these results.

Table 2: *Factors contributing to teachers' knowledge base of pronunciation pedagogy (PrP)*

| | Tanya | Laura | Abby | Ginger | Vala |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Language learning experience | French; Spanish | Spanish, Latin | Bilingual (English & Port); Norwegian | French, Spanish, Japanese, Turkish | Spanish |
| --Most memorable component related to pronunciation | Repetition: sounds/words | Spanish phonology course (sound formation) | Repetition: Words | Repetition: Words and Phrases | Repetition: Words and Sounds |
| MA course that focused the most on PrP | Pronunciation | Pronunciation | Pronunciation | Listening/Speaking | Methods |
| --Textbook | Celce-Murcia et al. (1996); Grant (2001) | Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) | Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) | Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) | possibly Ur (1991) |
| --Most memorable component | Phonetic symbols/individual sounds | Classroom practices – design activities for students | Techniques: Word stress & Rhythm | Analyzing learner language (tutoring) | Listen to Group micro-teaching (Chinese) |
| Instructor | W | X | X | Y | Z |
| Current OC course | High Beginning | Low Intermediate | Intermediate | Intermediate | High Intermediate |
| Times taught | 1 | 1 | 6-7 | 3 | 4 |
| Features taught in this course | Syllables, word endings, consonants, vowels, word stress, rhythm, intonation, connected speech | Vowels, consonants, syllables, word endings, word stress | Syllables, rhythm, vowels, word stress | Syllables, rhythm, vowels, word stress | Syllables, word stress, word endings |

As illustrated in Table 2, the five participants have experience learning at least one L2 as part of their secondary and tertiary educations. Of the five participants, only one was bilingual, Abby, who grew up learning both English and Portuguese. When asked to describe the most memorable moments learning pronunciation in an L2, the instructors' descriptions were, for the most part, very similar. In every case, the repetition of sounds, words and/or phrases represented the essence of learning L2 pronunciation for these teachers. The only participant who differed was Laura who, as part of her bachelor's degree in Spanish, took a course in Spanish phonology, where she learned about the articulation of sounds.

Specific training in PrP differed among the instructors. Altogether, they received MA degrees from three different universities. The graduate curriculum at institution A included a course that was entirely devoted to PrP. Tanya took the course with instructor W while Laura and Abby took it with instructor X. At institution B, Ginger took a course on teaching listening and speaking which included a component on pronunciation instruction. At both of these two institutions, three graduate course instructors, all of whom are well-known specialists in pronunciation instruction, used Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin's (1996) book in their respective courses. Instructor X also used Grant's *Well said* (2001). Vala, unlike the other four instructors, received little or no education in PrP. The closest training she received was the small amount that was covered in a course on TESOL methodology.

When asked to describe the most memorable part of their PrP course, the teachers' responses varied considerably, ranging from learning about the articulation of individual segmentals to learning specific techniques for teaching prosodic elements to practice working with an English language learner. Tanya responded that being introduced to phonetic symbols and descriptions of individual sounds had the largest impact on her. For Laura, she attached more importance to classroom practices in general and how to design specific pronunciation-oriented activities for students. In Abby's case, she best recalled specific techniques for teaching word stress and rhythm. Ginger, who took a course on teaching listening/speaking, was only able to remember one, albeit major, PrP component of that course. For her, she remembered a tutoring project where she had to analyze the speech of her student, identify three features of English pronunciation that he had the most difficulty with (done in consultation with course instructor Y), and work with the student to improve his pronunciation in those three areas. Finally, Vala's situation differed the most from the other four instructors. From what she was able to recall, only the Methods had a focus on pronunciation instruction, and that focus solely involved student microteaching sessions in which one of the groups taught a mini-lesson on Chinese pronunciation.

Another major factor that is frequently cited in the literature as having a significant influence on teachers' knowledge about language teaching, and that also has a major influence on the teachers in the current study, is their teaching experience (Gatbonton, 2008; Mattheoudakis, 2007). Each instructor has experience teaching the specific OC course investigated in the present study, thus through teaching the required content of this course, they have either learned about or enhanced their previous understanding of different elements of English pronunciation. Both Tanya and Laura have taught their respective OC courses once, Abby has taught her course six to seven times; Ginger has taught her course three times; and Vala has taught her course four times. Table 1 lists the features of pronunciation taught in each course. (These same features are also required

elements to teach in the IEP curriculum). As will be shown later, this experience has played a role in both their knowledge of and confidence in teaching pronunciation.

Strongest Influence on Current Practice

Another component of this study focused on one of the questions asked in the interviews: *What has had the greatest influence on how you teach pronunciation?* Both the teachers' responses and their observed classroom practices are explored in addressing this question.

Tanya

According to Tanya, the factors that have had the strongest influence on how she teaches pronunciation today is her graduate education, learning through “trial and error” and “having a good textbook to follow”. This latter factor can be directly linked to her graduate education. As part of her PrP course and during her MA practicum placement, she used Linda Grant’s (2001) *Well Said*; thus, she received a “double dose” of sorts of the material covered in this one book.

Her current classroom practice in many ways reflects this education. The observations revealed that Tanya regularly uses Linda Grant's (2007) *Well Said Intro* with her high-beginning course. Many of the explanations that Tanya gives about rules or guidelines related to pronunciation come from this text as do the majority of activities that she uses in the classroom. She explained that she “really like[s]” the activities in this book and that this book is “the basic standard”. Using the textbook, however, does not represent the entirety of her lessons. She also occasionally supplements materials or activities that she acquired in her graduate course in PrP.

Laura

As with Tanya, Laura also identified her graduate education as having the greatest impact on how she teaches pronunciation in her low-intermediate OC course. She noted that “I think if I wouldn’t have had that [PrP] course... I think I would feel very uncomfortable teaching pronunciation... [It’s] probably had the most effect as far as me actually teaching pronunciation and how I teach it.”

Observations of her lessons corroborated Laura's belief that her graduate education played a key role in how she taught pronunciation to her student. During these observations, Laura used several techniques that she mentioned having learned as part of her pronunciation pedagogy course. One of these included stretching a rubber band when saying the stressed part of a word (to demonstrate word stress). She also supplemented her lessons with exercises from a pronunciation textbook. She also supplemented her lessons with exercises from Gilbert's *Clear Speech* (2005).

Abby

Similarly, Abby also considered her graduate education as having the most influence on her teaching of English pronunciation. She stated, “I think the biggest influence is [Instructor

Y]...and that is where I get most of ...my ideas, knowledge.” She explained that learning that there are rules for stress in English was “quite eye-opening.”

The observed classes reflected this previous training. Many of the techniques that she reported learning in the MA course surfaced in the observed classes. These techniques included, but were not limited to, using both Acton’s “syllablettes” (see Acton, 1998) and rubber bands (see Gilbert, 2008) for teaching word stress.

Ginger

Unlike the previous three participants, Ginger considered her experiences of learning multiple foreign languages as having the strongest influence on her pronunciation teaching, although collaboration with a colleague also played a prominent role in her teaching. In particular, she discussed the importance of not singling students out in class, especially when working on pronunciation. Avoiding putting students in situations where they might feel embarrassed was a principle that she highlighted as having priority in her classes. Furthermore, she reported remembering only a limited amount from her graduate coursework. As mentioned earlier, her main memory of that course centers on the tutoring project she did. She explained that the focus of the MA course was on listening and speaking, resulting in less time being devoted to pronunciation. In addition, she furthered identified collaboration with Abby as having an impact on how she teaches. Referring to the time when she taught the intermediate OC course for the first time, Ginger said, “I went out of my way to bug Abby...Abby, what’s this? What’s that? Why? Why do you use the kazoo? ... We were very collaborative ...”

Ginger’s observed practice mirrored her beliefs, but not to the same extent as she reported in the interviews. Observations showed the impact that her earlier language learning experiences had on her teaching: she rarely singled out students in front of the class to give them feedback on their pronunciation. However, while Ginger emphasized the impact of her experiences as a L2 learner when asked what had the greatest influence on her teaching, what seemed to have an even greater impact was her collaboration with Abby. As I observed both Abby and Ginger teach pronunciation, many of the activities I saw in Abby’s classes, one’s that Abby had pinpointed as activities or techniques she had learned in her graduate course on pronunciation pedagogy, also appeared in Ginger’s lessons. In fact, several of these techniques Ginger mentioned as having learned from Abby. Thus, in many ways, the graduate education received by Abby also benefited Ginger’s teaching of L2 pronunciation. Ginger’s collaboration with Abby, has had considerable influence on how Ginger teaches pronunciation to her students.

Vala

The development of Vala’s knowledge of PrP differed from the other instructors. When asked what has had the most influence on her teaching of pronunciation, Vala responded with “I don’t know. That’s hard to say. I think all of that experience of “just winging it” taught me a lot...all of those crazy experiences I’ve had of playing teacher without any guidance were pretty influential.” In this quote, she is referring, at least in part, to her experience as an MA student trying to complete an unsupervised practicum that she did in a volunteer ESL program. Without

any training in how to teach pronunciation and having no guidance from a practicum supervisor, she felt as though she had to learn everything on her own.

During the observations, Vala showed a strong dependence on the course textbook when teaching pronunciation, a book that was not devoted to pronunciation, but rather to OC skills in general. For the most part, she adhered to the limited number of pronunciation activities in that book; however, she made the activities more interactive. She had the students work in groups and she encouraged them to use each other as models and teachers of pronunciation, explaining to them that she “will not always be [their] teacher”.

All instructors

The stories described above show that graduate education, collaboration with colleagues, textbooks, and teaching experience have had an impact on the five teachers to varying degrees. For Tanya, Laura and Abby, the interviews and observations revealed that graduate education in many ways seemed to have the strongest influence on how they teach pronunciation, whereas for Ginger, who had less training, and for Vala, who had no training, formal education seemed to play a minimal role, if at all. These pronunciation-related results are similar to the grammar-related findings of Borg (1998) in that Borg found that teacher training seemed to override one teacher's prior beliefs about language teaching. In the present study, for teachers with limited or no teacher training in PrP, the textbook and/or collaboration with a colleague appeared to have the greatest impact on their teaching of pronunciation. Ginger learned more about teaching pronunciation from working with a colleague. This notion of knowledge sharing with colleagues has further been found to aid teachers to learn from their teaching experiences in other research (Sengupta & Xiao, 2002). Finally, for Vala she appeared to learn how to teach pronunciation mainly from ESL textbooks and from teaching experience.

In addition to the presence or absence of graduate training in PrP, classroom observations and/or interviews revealed that prior L2 learning experience, namely that of repetition drills, also had a role in the teachers' classroom practices. During the interviews, each of the five teachers identified repetition work as the most memorable activity, or the only activity, that they recalled of learning pronunciation in an L2. Similarly, the role of repetition work was apparent in each of observed OC courses and/or discussed by the teachers during the interviews. Repetition work was evident in many of the observed classes taught by Tanya, Laura and Vala; however, for Abby and Ginger, links to prior L2 learning experience could only be based on the teachers' self-reported use of repetition drills in their OC courses. Nevertheless, observations revealed that Abby's and Ginger's students experienced a more delayed type of repetition practice. Instead of repeating immediately after their teacher, the students reproduced the teacher's utterances (whether a sound, word, phrase or sentence) several seconds or even up to a minute after hearing the utterance. The teachers would ask the students to reproduce an utterance typically after the teacher either pointed to a written word/sentence or a picture) or used a gesture or other kinesthetic movement (e.g., clapping to a measured beat) to indicate that students were expected to reproduce the earlier teacher's utterance.

Confidence and Pronunciation Instruction

Strongly connected to teachers' knowledge about teaching pronunciation is their confidence in that knowledge. I asked each of the teachers: *How confident are you in teaching pronunciation?* Their responses are provided in Table 3:

Table 3: *Teachers' Confidence in Teaching Pronunciation*

| Participant | Confidence in teaching pronunciation |
|----------------|--|
| Tanya: | "Some days I feel more confident than others. Probably has more to do with my personal feelings versus my ability to teach pronunciation...But generally, especially if I've taught the class before, I feel pretty certain I can answer any questions that come up or figure out the answer, make up an answer to a question." |
| Laura: | "I think I am confident, fairly confident teaching it, maybe 7 out of 10, but sometimes I worry what are the students getting out of this. I am not sure I guess that my instruction is really making a difference down the line." |
| Abby: | Teaching level 3 yes. And actually I think if I were to go down now, if I were to go down to level 2 or level 1, after this project, you know, we were really working on segmentals [in reference to her research project with Ginger] yeah. Yeah, now I feel like I could handle level one and level two. |
| Ginger: | "I'm much more confident now. If you asked me spring of 2008, I would have been like I'm just a disaster...But now that I've done it a few times and I know the subject matter of the course really well, I guess I should say in the context of my course, I feel really confident." |
| Vala: | "I don't have enough experience. I feel that I could be better at it. I would be better at it if we had a pronunciation class, because I'd get the experience. But then, the classes that we teach don't really incorporate that much, so outside of the stuff that gets covered in our classes and like extemporaneous stuff that happens, I don't feel so confident with it. I don't feel that I was exposed enough to it, to how to teach it different ways and have to get them to practice it different ways. Beyond what I do, not so confident. New territory, a little scary!" |

The thoughts expressed by each of the participants indicate that graduate training in PrP and experience teaching a specific course may have had a direct impact on their confidence in teaching pronunciation. The four teachers with graduate training in PrP all expressed having confidence in teaching pronunciation at least in the OC course in which they have experience teaching. For Vala, however, the story is different. Even though she had taught the course four times in the past, she remains insecure in her teaching of pronunciation. Beyond the few techniques that she has learned for teaching pronunciation features in her course, she keenly feels the gaps in her knowledge base as a result of her lack of training. Nevertheless, even the teachers with training in PrP are noticeably uncertain in their ability to teach new features of pronunciation not covered in their courses. However, unlike the findings of MacDonald (2002)

that showed that inadequately teachers were reluctant to teach pronunciation, neither the classroom observations nor the interviews indicated that the five teachers were even partially reluctant to teach pronunciation. In fact, Vala expressed a desire to teach a pronunciation course in order to expand her knowledge base of PrP.

CONCLUSION

Although the findings from this study are based on the cognitions and practices of only five teachers, it seems clear that TESOL programs comprising at least one course dedicated to PrP may have a significant impact on both teachers' knowledge of PrP and confidence in teaching pronunciation. Furthermore, unlike grammar and literacy skills, pronunciation appears to be rarely or only partially taught in L2 learning experiences of teachers; thus, many teachers may have neither adequate knowledge about English pronunciation nor sufficient knowledge of how to teach it. Overall, these results indicate that increased attention needs to be devoted to PrP in TESOL programs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTE

¹ The results reported here are based on partial findings from the author's dissertation project on *Pronunciation pedagogy: Second language teacher cognition and practice*. The larger project also includes an examination of students' beliefs in comparison with the beliefs of the teachers.

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